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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001805

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: [IS](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: PRESIDENTIAL HOPEFUL BELIEVES ELECTORAL
LAW IS CRITICAL ELEMENT FOR DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

[¶1.](#) (C) Maronite presidential hopeful Nassib Lahoud said he believes that adoption of Lebanon's draft electoral law will hinge on how much political capital Saad Hariri commits to it -- as well as a decision by Michel Aoun and Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah to only mildly resist it. The reform minded Lahoud, cousin of President Emile Lahoud, is cautiously optimistic the draft will become law without too many changes. He believes it will be the most important piece of legislation debated in the Parliament this year. If adopted in its present form, the law could well break the monopoly Hizballah exerts on Lebanon's Shia community and lead to the emergence of pluralistic political parties. On regional developments, Lahoud worried about the increasing influence of Iran in Lebanon. He thought that increased tension with Iran will lead to instability in Lebanon since Hizballah is in its thrall. End summary.

BELIEVES PROSPECTS FOR ELECTORAL
REFORM ARE GOOD

[¶2.](#) (C) The reform-minded former MP Nassib Lahoud met with poloff on June 5 in Beirut. Lahoud, who is widely considered to be one of the leading presidential candidates if Lebanon's Parliament were to remove President Emile Lahoud, said that the just-released draft electoral law is the essential element in Lebanon's transition to democracy. Passage of the law as written would break the "stranglehold" that established political blocs now hold on the country. He is convinced that the introduction of proportional voting and constraints on outside campaign financing will curtail the power of Hizballah and the Future Movement, with a lesser impact on Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party.

[¶3.](#) (C) Even though he feels it will reduce the number of delegates who owe political allegiance to Saad Hariri's Future Movement, Lahoud believes that the pro-reform Hariri should and will support the proposed statute, because it will strengthen the ranks of the pro-reform coalition. Lahoud said he has heard that political advisors across the spectrum have been calculating the electoral impact of the proposed mixed system of qada and muhafaza voting districts. The consensus opinion is that the pro-reform forces will benefit overall.

[¶4.](#) (C) Lahoud stated that strong support from Hariri, as

leader of the pro-reform movement, is essential because the parochial interests of several Sunni delegates have already arisen with ill-informed and premature criticism of the draft law. He hoped that Hariri would return soon to Lebanon to lead pro-reform forces in the coming parliamentary debate.

¶15. (C) Regarding Michel Aoun, another Maronite presidential aspirant, Lahoud said that the former general's overconfidence leads Aoun to believe that his 60-70 percent support in the Christian community is solid and would hold firm through any of the proposed electoral changes. Lahoud said that he expects the FPM parliamentary forces to be mildly supportive of the measure in the upcoming debate, but will look for opportunities to introduce changes that would benefit the Maronite vote.

¶16. (C) From his discussions with a range of political leaders, Lahoud is convinced that Speaker Nabih Berri will schedule a special session of Parliament to debate the draft law. Without explaining the reasoning of such a move, he also said that Siniora's Cabinet would expeditiously refer the draft law to Parliament with few if any changes. In this scenario, he implied the real test will take place in the legislature.

¶17. (C) According to Lahoud, passage of an effective law would be enhanced by greater public support for electoral reform. Unfortunately, public debate in the past week has been surprisingly light. He said the Electoral Commission had performed admirably in taking disparate confessional concerns into consideration and producing a balanced compromise. Although he was cautiously optimistic that the law would be enacted in something close to its original form, Lahoud said he would work diligently in the coming weeks to generate public momentum in favor of it.

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REGIONAL ISSUES PRESSING ON LEBANON

¶18. (C) Lahoud, even though he believes electoral reform is central to creating a fully democratic system, said the more pressing concern to most Lebanese is Iran's confrontation with the West over its nuclear ambitions. While hoping for constructive engagement and a diplomatic resolution, Lahoud believes Tehran could easily misjudge the situation and resort to actions which will be felt in Lebanon. He recognizes that Hizballah, along with Hamas, have become two of the primary external levers the Iranian regime can use to destabilize the region. He is concerned that Iran may pull these levers. Lahoud said that last year's withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and an increased flow of funds from Iran has effectively shifted the line of command for Hizballah from Damascus to Tehran.

¶19. (C) Lahoud assessed the May 28 hostilities along the Blue Line as Syria having had the most to gain from Hizballah's action, but that Iran had to give its assent to Hizballah. Lahoud theorized that Hassan Nasrallah would never have chanced the loss of public support outside the Shia community that the fighting produced; thus, the attacks across the Blue Line had to have been ordered from Syria and approved by Iran.

¶10. (C) The heavy Hizballah/IDF exchanges of May 28, Lahoud continued, would extract a heavy price from the myth of the "resistance." The Christian community in particular was losing patience with the lack of sovereign control over events which could draw Lebanon into large scale hostilities. Lahoud was convinced that Hizballah is finally beginning to realize that the bills for Iranian support are coming due. The events along the Blue Line, as well as the national anxiety created by Hizballah's June 1 demonstrations in Beirut, are reducing Hizballah's margin for error. Lahoud said it will be interesting to see whether Nasrallah reacts

aggressively or defensively when the March 14 coalition presents its security strategy at this week's national dialogue meeting.

FELTMAN